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The end of the “safe space” for unions? A response to Simon Joyce

Martin Upchurch

Simon Joyce has written a welcome article that seeks to address why Britain’s strike record is at a historically low level.¹ Simon’s argument is that the “confidence theory” of strike action, associated with the International Socialist tradition, is insufficient to explain contemporary labour quiescence. Simon does not dismiss the importance of worker confidence as a condition for robust strike activity, but suggests that the Socialist Workers Party has been over-optimistic in expecting confidence to rise during the long period of declining strike activity.² Simon offers an explanation that places emphasis on the constraining power of the institutions within which trade unions operate. In particular, unions at workplace level have become increasingly restricted in their ability to take “lawful” strike action since the 1980s. As a result, Simon argues, legislative constraint has had a debilitating effect on shop stewards’ autonomy: “By the early 1990s the strike weapon had effectively been taken out of the hands of shop stewards.” Furthermore, “the fact that the strike weapon has been taken out of the hands of shop stewards means it will be very difficult for increasing anger and/or confidence to be translated into rising strike levels”.³

1: Joyce, 2015.

2: We should note that this decline is not confined to the UK, but is apparent across most Western European states—see Godard, 2011.

3: Joyce, 2015, pp120; 141.

In presenting his case Simon has produced a sophisticated analysis, which delves into the mediatory processes such as structural changes in the economy, the suffocating role of the union bureaucracies, and key defeats for the unions that may explain a fall in strikes in the 1980s. Somewhat coyly, Simon has steered clear of presenting his case in terms of the “balance of class forces” or of the overall state of workers’ political and class consciousness, preferring to conduct an “analysis of why there are so few strikes”.⁴ It is these latter factors which, despite Simon’s coyness, need addressing. I wish to respond to Simon’s arguments at two levels, neither of which seeks to refute or denigrate his analysis, but which seek instead to add observations and different insights. First, it is necessary to rehearse the importance of assessing the “balance of class forces”. Second, we need to explore critically the strike trends apparent in Britain, which are rooted not only in structural factors but also in the dialectic of consciousness.

The balance of class forces

One of the major tasks of classical Marxist analysis of workers’ propensity to take strike action is to unpick the dynamic of workers’ prevailing uneven and contradictory consciousness. We need to understand how consciousness breaks through from an acceptance of the prevailing bourgeois ideology of the capitalist work regime to one in which workers see their interests as fundamentally opposed to that of capital. In Gramscian terms, this means breaking with the “common sense” view of the world perpetrated by the media, education system and so forth into a worldview whereby workers exercise “good sense” based on their own collective strength and understanding of the antagonism between capital and labour.⁵ In undertaking this task, we should not fall into mechanical traps of extrapolating from the past into the present and future, because as Georg Lukács has argued, consciousness does not develop (or slip away) in linear fashion.⁶ The shift from workers viewing themselves as objects or subalterns, caged and commodified within the confines of their labour power, into conscious subjects who can determine their own future is a dialectical process. As Richard Hyman argued in his 1972 book *Strikes*:

To do justice to its complexity, industrial sociologists must be attuned to this dynamic interaction between structure and consciousness. A static or

4: Joyce, 2015, p120.

5: Gramsci, 1999, p664.

6: Lukács, 1974, pp108–109.

a one-way analysis necessarily distorts social reality, and is therefore an inadequate base for understanding industrial behaviour or predicting its development.⁷

In other words, we cannot assume any stasis but must follow a dynamism in which change can occur without prediction, subject to a build-up of forces which break through as stresses and strains accumulate, very much as quantum leaps may take place in natural science as sometimes unseen pressures accumulate beneath the surface. This process will be a product of contradictory pressures shaped by the nature of capitalism, with tipping points occurring due to tensions within the system. This is not a deterministic process. While the forces of production take primacy in our laboratory of action, the relations of production interplay and interact to create the conditions by which action may or may not take place. We may predict with certainty the constancy of bourgeois efforts to intensify worker exploitation, as this is a product of the inherent contradiction between the interests of capital and labour, and the competition between capitalists themselves. But as John Molyneux has stated in this journal:

When it comes to the proletarian side we cannot say, à la Newton, that every (bourgeois) action meets with an equal and opposite reaction. It is an empirical fact that there has always been resistance to exploitation and oppression even in the most difficult circumstances (even in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, even in the death camps and the gulag). But it is no less a fact that there is always also acquiescence and even collaboration. The relative proportions of these different responses vary enormously and not in any fixed or mechanical relationship to economic conditions.⁸

Thus we see periods, or waves, of great labour unrest in history, not predictable by tracking the immediate past, but often unforeseen and determined by leaps in consciousness and breaks with the status quo. It becomes possible for such “leaps” in consciousness to follow long periods of labour quiescence. Often such waves follow a prolonged period of capital restructuring in terms of shifts within the productive forces as capital seeks new areas to accumulate as old sectors fade in their capacity continually to generate higher than average rates of profit. In the fading sectors, capital is forced to strengthen the chains of exploitation through new technology or the downscaling of

7: Hyman, 1989, p76.

8: Molyneux, 1995, pp60-61.

staffing, further exacerbating a crisis of profitability as the organic composition of capital (the ratio of capital invested in equipment, machinery, etc compared to that invested in labour power) rises ever more steeply.

In other sectors, such as the auto industry, a problem is created by over-capacity, as rival manufacturers overstretch themselves in better times in an effort to out-strip their rivals. The subsequent adjustments to capacity then lead to a brutal process of creative destruction, marked not only by restructuring, mergers and take-overs, but also by intensified exploitation of the workforce. Thus we have seen employer efforts to introduce lean production methods and robotics which have intensified work and fractured the labour force. Overall auto production in the UK has not fallen. The UK remains home to over 30 manufacturers building more than 70 models. Similarly the volume of autos produced in the UK is set to reach an all time high in 2017.⁹ Restructuring has enabled increases in productivity to compensate for labour shedding. In addition, the “balance of class forces” at the micro-level of the sector has been subject to a focused offensive by employers to smash worker autonomy and reduce the potential for collective action. Paul Stewart and his co-authors, in their study of the auto industry, quote Peter Titherington, the former convener of Vauxhall Ellesmere Port. Talking in 1992 he said: “Under the piece rate system we directly sold the fruits of our labour. Under Measured Day Work we sold our time. Under lean, management determine our labour input and time with a vengeance”.¹⁰

Part of the process of the employer offensive was, of course, a strategic shift in industrial relations management. The sacking of Derek Robinson, convenor at British Leyland’s Longbridge plant, in 1979 heralded a move away from management attempts to “bureaucratise” and institutionalise shop stewards to a process of union marginalisation.¹¹ Victimisation and sackings of union rank and file representatives followed throughout the engineering sector in the following two decades, accompanied by downscaling of employment as plants were rationalised and new “HRM” (human resource management)

9: See the auto manufacturers’ annual statistics at www.smmmt.co.uk/industry-topics/uk-automotive-sector/#responsiveTabs1

10: Stewart and others, 2009, p16.

11: A fascinating description of the scale of this “bureaucratisation” is given by ex-Leyland worker Dave Lyddon. He wrote in this journal in 1977: “In larger factories there are probably now half a dozen senior stewards and convenors who don’t even have a nominal job but who are provided by management with an office and telephone, and are paid to be full-time union representatives in the factory... Those senior stewards and convenors based in an office cease to be the direct representatives of the workers on the spot... Senior stewards don’t share the work experience of their members... And they don’t suffer the car workers’ constant insecurity of a fluctuating wage packet. Is it any wonder they get out of touch?”—Lyddon, 1977.

techniques such as insourcing, outsourcing and individual performance related pay were introduced. National pay bargaining in the engineering industry was abandoned by the employers in 1989 in a drive towards enterprise level bargaining and “flexibility”. Research conducted by Andy Danford, Mike Richardson and myself at engineering plants in the south west of England highlight the devastation:

The AEEU [Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union, now part of Unite] lost every one of its workplace representatives at BAe Systems during a redundancy in 1995; 75 percent of its representatives at Rolls Royce were made redundant in 1991-92... During the same period many leading MSF [Manufacturing, Science and Finance, also now incorporated into Unite] Unity Left activists were selected for redundancy...in 1991 the complete MSF representatives committee was dismissed at BAe Dynamics...and the union was subsequently derecognised.¹²

But despite this sobering experience, as both the above quoted research studies highlight, there remains union resilience within many of these plants. The problem here for the unions is not one of apathy or disinterest, but one where union activists have struggled to transcend management ideology of “the need for profitability” (the battle here has often been with the trade union bureaucracy); of appreciating the necessity of reorienting and rethinking union strategy on management offensives such as lean production and outsourcing; combined with the need to grow a new cadre of younger stewards to implement the strategy. Simon, of course, knows these experiences full well through his own research. But in presenting a structurally bound reasoning for the decline in strikes in manufacturing, and by placing emphasis on exposure to product market competition and hostile legislation as key explanations for decline, he downplays the importance of assessing the “balance of class forces” as a *qualitative* variable.

So what are the prospects for resilience to turn into revival, and how does confidence marry into this equation? As I have hopefully begun to illustrate, such a process depends as much on a qualitative assessment of the balance of class forces as it does on structural factors. We need to assess the dialectical relationship between shifts and changes in the forces of production and the response found in the social relations of production that will provide us with an insight into prospects for the future. Writing in this journal in 1979, Tony Cliff emphasised the point. Referring to the

12: Danford, Richardson, and Upchurch, 2003, p46.

low level of struggle of traditionally militant workers such as the miners, dockers, shipyard workers and engineers he noted new sectors going into battle such as tanker drivers, bakers, journalists and firefighters. British Oxygen (BOC) workers were also notable for their use of flying pickets and Perkins Diesel workers for their use of the occupation tactic. However, he refused to be carried away, writing:

It would be a grave mistake to put the success of the workers of Ford, BOC and lorry drivers in the same league as the victory of the miners in 1972 or 1974. The victory of the miners changed the balance of class forces in the country as a whole radically in favour of the working class. The victories of Ford, BOC and the lorry drivers did not. For a Marxist a sense of proportion is central in grasping reality. The heart of the dialectics—this very important if abused concept—is the relations between quantity and quality.¹³

Of course, as Simon himself identifies, the defeats of the British working class in the form of the steel workers, civil servants, printers and above all the miners in the 1980s profoundly affected the “balance of class forces” in Britain. Part of this shift in balance towards the employers involved a degradation of the rank and file activist’s “confidence” and a refocusing of the locus of power and authority in the unions towards the trade union bureaucracy and their newly adopted mantra of “partnership” and “third way” acceptance of neoliberalism. The two trends went hand in hand, and created a future in which the battle between rank and file and bureaucracy in the unions was focused not just on activists’ ability to organise independently of the officials, but also on the necessity of challenging an ideology that raised the market onto an unassailable pedestal. This underlines the importance of “political trade unionism”, based on the rank and file, in order to rise to the new challenges.

We can even begin to speculate how “shifts” in aggregate capital accumulation play out in a wider arena. Beverly Silver explores these shifts within capitalist accumulation strategies and describes a “pendulum” effect whereby capitalism as an aggregate whole moves from a crisis of profitability (1870s, 1970s), from which state and employers begin renewed offensives against labour, to one of a crisis of legitimacy (1930s and today) characterised by worker resistance to “the breakdown of established social compacts, the re-commodification of labour and growing inter-class inequality”.¹⁴ In

13: Cliff, 1979.

14: Silver, 2014, p59.

“rising” sectors, such as retail or food distribution, the potential for collective action by workers assumes an upward trend. As Simon’s tables of strikes clearly show,¹⁵ it is in these sectors (transport, distribution, etc) that strike levels have remained relatively firm, while in mining (essentially destroyed as an industry in Britain) and manufacturing (in the process of a long employer offensive from widespread restructuring and union marginalisation) strike statistics have fallen drastically.¹⁶ The potential for strike action in many sectors such as food and retail distribution is a relatively novel one but one that is certainly real, as witnessed by recent UK strikes at Argos and Hovis, as well as strikes in Amazon distribution depots in Germany and against Walmart in the United States.

The point here is that any analysis of strike statistics must take account of the longer effects of capital accumulation strategies and the consequences for the social relations of production that are redrawn in the process. Rather than focus on institutional explanations for the downward trend in the UK strike statistics, we should instead force our analysis into a wider frame of changes in political economy and the structure of capital accumulation. In doing so we should be mindful that since the crisis of profitability in the late 1960s onwards we have been witnessing a major change in the forces of production, accompanied by a long drawn out employer offensive against labour, from which labour has not yet gathered its own energies to regroup and fight back on a consistent front.

We can discern this qualitative change in strikes. Strikes over national collective pay agreements (in the past the most common cause of strikes) have withered as the selfsame agreements have been thrown on the scrapheap by employers. As Kerstin Hamann and colleagues show in their data, we see the rise of the (one-day) coordinated public sector strike and the general strike, which have come to dominate strike trends in Western Europe.¹⁷ These strikes, often bureaucratically controlled and limited to a single day, presage a wider political fight against the austerity engendered by the contemporary crisis of capitalism. Indeed, the wave of industrial unrest discernible in wider terms across the globe in 2010–11, together with the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring and now the explosion of radical left parties such as Syriza and Podemos, may, in this context, be preliminary skirmishes in a longer period of intensified resistance.

15: Joyce, 2015, pp130; 131.

16: Joyce, 2015, tables 2 and 3.

17: Hamann, Johnston, and Kelly, 2013.

The trade union bureaucracy

The progress of the class struggle is a product not only of the “balance of class forces” but also of the mediatory role of institutions or, as Antonio Gramsci called them, “earthworks” that surround the citadel of capital, which can act as a break on the development of consciousness by the processes of deflection or containment. Such “earthworks”, at least when Gramsci was writing in his Italian prison cell, may include not just the media (nationalist, racist, imperialist rhetoric, etc) but also institutions such as the church, which act to deflect workers’ class-based dissent into respect for a “higher” mystical authority. The trade union bureaucracy and the “social democratic” leaderships of “parties of labour” such as the Labour Party in Britain, Pasok in Greece, or the SPD in Germany also fulfil a deflective role. However, while Simon does refer in his article to the potentially stifling role of the trade union bureaucracy, his analysis is only in passing and is consequently subdued. The role of the bureaucracy as a factor in limiting and determining *rank and file* confidence needs expansion fully to justify its importance.

Within a framework of both conservative and social democratic governments in power the state as a force of capital may seek accommodation with the trade union bureaucracy—tied as they are to the “national interest”—in order to deradicalise the workers’ movement. Concessions are offered to the unions, giving them some “legitimacy” within the body politic. This creates space for the normalisation of the dispute as a way of workers seeking redress, while at the same time placing responsibility for ending the dispute within the hands of trade union leaders. So, in the post First World War period, national collective bargaining was encouraged by governments and accepted by the majority of employers as a method of containing and “institutionalising” industrial conflict in the wake of a rise in rank and file unrest. Similarly, the 1968 Donovan Commission brought forward a whole range of proposals (“professional” personnel management, ACAS mediation and conciliation, formalised and “agreed” discipline and grievance procedures, etc) designed to take the sting out of rank and file led unofficial action. But most trenchantly the trade union leaderships act as a bureaucratic dead hand within the body politic, placing the interest of the union “as a whole” before that of militant sections. The social democratic ideological orientations of the trade union bureaucracy, encapsulated in their organic links with the Labour Party leadership, will also act to ensure that the “national” interest (ie of “national” capital) takes precedence over class solidarity at key tipping points.¹⁸

18: Joyce, 2015, p136; Darlington and Upchurch, 2012.

Tipping points occur when the “balance of class forces” sways towards the rank and file in periods of labour militancy. In such instances a “tipping point” may be engendered by the state to suppress the rank and file and even to discipline the trade union leaderships in the process. In turn, new legislative powers may be introduced by governments which consolidate the locus of power within unions into the hands of the bureaucracy at the expense of the rank and file. The TUC’s betrayal of the miners in the 1926 General Strike is a dramatic example. Walter Citrine, TUC general secretary during the strike, was brazen enough to record in his memoirs 30 years later that he “did not regard the General Strike as a failure”. The reason for his view was simply that “the theory of the general strike had never been thought out”, and, most trenchantly, that the TUC’s position of authority remained intact when it brought a *negotiated* end to the dispute.¹⁹ Citrine sought to “modernise” the trade union movement and acted as a collaborator on behalf of the TUC in the 1928 Mond-Turner talks with employers which aimed to create a “consensus” system of industrial relations. The TUC’s approach failed, as the majority of employers’ organisations sensed the balance of class forces tipping in their favour, and wished instead to pursue a relentless offensive against organised labour, including work intensification and victimisation of trade union activists. The government pursued a similar strategy, introducing the 1927 Trades Dispute and Trade Unions Act, outlawing most general strikes and sympathy action and restricting union affiliation to the Labour Party, while at the same time bringing to trial and imprisoning many Communist Party militants.

Nevertheless, it was under this oppressive regime that the engineers’ union managed to revive its membership through a process of collectivising grievances engendered by the selfsame employer offensive. Far from operating under benign legislation, as claimed by Simon, the union faced increasing hostility on all fronts, *including legislation*, but managed to increase its membership from 190,000 in 1933 to over 900,000 in 1945.²⁰ The increase was driven by rank and file action (of apprentices and others) and the development of activist networks grouped around papers such as *Propellor* (later renamed *New Propellor*) which the Communist Party leadership within the engineers’ union, together with a critical mass of Communist militants in individual workplaces, became duty bound to support. Indeed, the role of CP activists was crucial in galvanising and consolidating rank and file confidence. As Richard Croucher records in *Engineers at War*, “They...were

19: Citrine, 1964, pp216–217.

20: Croucher and Upchurch, 2012.

prepared to go where wiser men had feared to tread”.²¹

A second key period can be located just prior to the great upturn in industrial struggle in the 1970s. Indeed, we can argue that a sea-change in the body politic began to gestate in the late 1960s and bloomed in the 1970s as the post-war economic boom collapsed. It was a Labour government that dealt the first blow to the unions. This is encapsulated in Labour prime minister Harold Wilson’s tirade against the National Union of Seamen in 1966, whereby, as his cabinet colleague Lord Wigg recalls, “Wilson’s conduct reached a high water mark... Single handed he smashed a strike”.²² Wilson’s project was one in which Labour sought not just to smash the rank and file but also to humiliate the leadership of a recalcitrant union as well. The old “consensus” welfare politics of national collective bargaining and relatively liberal trade union legislation gave way to a markedly more aggressive capitalism (including a search for new global markets and labour power) against the background of a decline in corporate profitability across the advanced industrial nations.

The ensuing three decades have been dominated by the *longue durée* of coordinated employer attacks on working conditions, social benefits and pay, including Thatcher’s 1980s assault on the bastions of union power. It is this denial of a “safe space” for the unions that has severely affected trade union leaders’ ability to gain concessions from both employer and state, leading to a crisis of a particularised form of “social democratic trade unionism” and Labourism.²³ This crisis has not only denied legitimacy for trade union action (for example through legislative changes) but has also disoriented union activists from their familiar channels of parliamentary representation after the Labour Party’s retreat into social liberalism. This political shift has been linked to the raft of structural changes in contract expectations trading under the guise of “flexibility”, which include not only the employer-driven collapse of national collective bargaining in the manufacturing sector but also the privatisation of public sector services. Again a Labour government has been able to deliver this with some gusto. Note, for example, Tony Blair’s arrogant introduction to the 1998 “Fairness at Work” White Paper, that “Britain will have the most lightly regulated labour market of any leading economy in the world”.²⁴ This has formed the backdrop to the period covered in Simon’s article, and the implications must be understood in totality if we are to explain the low level of strikes.

21: Croucher, 1982, p33.

22: Quoted in Rosewell, 1973.

23: Upchurch, Taylor and Mathers, 2009.

24: Blair, 1998.

Cliff sensed the sea-change as long ago as 1971 when he wrote on the tasks at the time facing revolutionaries in workplaces when the working class was fragmented and driven into sectional interest. He records: “The old forest of reformism is withering. The trees are without leaves, the trunks are dying. But, in society, old ideas are not wiped out unless they are replaced by new ones”.²⁵ The task of replacing the old with the new did, of course, bear fruit in the early 1970s. Cliff even seemed taken by surprise by the turn of events. Writing two years later in 1973 he was intrigued by the rapid upturn in strike days “lost”. He went out of his way to attack the treacherous role of the trade union leaders. Their role was to hinder rather than help. On the 1972 miners’ strike he wrote:

The trade union bureaucracy has been treacherous... [Miners’ leader] Joe Gormley declared on the eve of the strike that if the government had raised the offer just a little the strike would not have taken place—he would probably have signed for £3... It was the initiative of the miners’ rank and file, in picketing power stations instead of wasting effort on picketing the pits, that led the way. Helped by railwaymen, lorry drivers and workers in the power industry, they won a magnificent victory.

On the dockers’ campaign to release the Pentonville Five, jailed under Tory anti-union law, Cliff wrote:

Again, look at the dockers’ struggle. It was a magnificent victory over the government when the five dockers were freed. The strike was unofficial. [Transport workers’ leader] Jack Jones kept his mouth shut, and did nothing at all to help the dockers. Reg Prentice, the shadow minister of labour, attacked the five dockers for breaking the law, and seeking self-advertisement.²⁶

In the following years the high point of 1972 receded into the downturn, as the trade union leaderships, including those affiliated to the Communist Party such as Ken Gill of the manufacturing staff union TASS, once again bailed out the system by agreeing the “social contract” with a Labour government. The point, however, had been made, in that both the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy operated at high points in the struggle with interests opposite to that of the rank and file. They would act to suppress militancy and hence severely damage the ability and confidence

²⁵: Cliff, 1971.

²⁶: Cliff, 1973.

of the rank and file to strike and win.

The emphasis on the rank and file has, of course, been central to the International Socialist tradition. This is not, however, because of some syndicalist obsession with militancy. Rather it is in recognition of the fact that the power of the employers and the state can only be overcome by mass action in the workplace. Such mass activism is driven by rank and file confidence, which in turn is subject to the ability to act independently of the trade union leaderships and the Labour Party. This requires political direction and leadership, both to explain and expose the role of the trade union leaders and to generalise the struggle in times of uneven consciousness. This is not to say that the trade union leaders are omnipotent, but rather that the relationship between the power of capital, the trade union leaderships and the rank and file is a fluid one. As Cliff succinctly wrote in 1988:

The trade union bureaucracy is always vacillating between the two main forces, workers and the employers. If they completely supported the employers they would lose their base. They sometimes support the workers against the employers for fear of losing everything. The degree of independence of the rank and file from the bureaucracy is in proportion to the level of confidence of the rank and file towards the employers. If the workers are very confident they can turn to the bureaucracy and say although you exist we don't care too much about you.²⁷

The lesson for today is that we cannot summon the necessary confidence out of the air. It has to be rebuilt through networks of rank and file militants working in varying degree sometimes with trade union officials and sometimes against them. Our task as revolutionary socialists remains the same, albeit with increased difficulty. Indeed, it is perhaps these increased difficulties that Simon has located within his article. Not only have massive structural changes in the economy militated against labour struggle, but economic factors (low inflation and high unemployment) have blunted the edge of the propensity to strike. I have attempted in this reply to add further thoughts located in a longer view of changes in political economy, the decline of the social democratic body politic and so on, that have acted to reshape the framework in which we may expect to see a revival of rank and file confidence. I suggest that both employers and the state have taken advantage of the new context and acted over a long period to consolidate the balance of class forces in their favour. But there is a contradiction here,

27: Cliff, 1988.

as it is precisely this capitalist offensive that has acted to delegitimise the root of their authority and added grist to the generalised crisis (political, economic and social) of the system. It is from this particularised contradiction that the roots of opposition and dissent continue to flourish. The dialectic of the transformation of anger and dissent into industrial struggle, however, remains unpredictable.

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